



notes from abroad

By Rick Smith

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The call from Rob Milne, Chief of the Office of International Affairs, was unexpected.

"Is it true that you and Kathy are going to Honduras on annual leave?" When I responded affirmatively, he countered with another question.

"Would you consider going a week earlier to follow up on Secretary Lujan's recent visit to Honduras?" He went on to relate that the Secretary had stopped in Honduras on a swing through Central America. He had promised Honduran officials that agencies under his supervision would visit the country to explore potential partnerships with Honduran conservation agencies. It would be my task, Rob explained, to examine whether there were ways the National Park Service could aid our colleagues in Honduras. Since any trip to Latin America is inevitably interesting, I eagerly accepted. I was not disappointed.

By developed country standards, Honduras is relatively poor. Slightly larger than Tennessee, it shares boundaries with Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The 5 - million people enjoy a subtropical climate in the lowlands and a temperate one in the mountains. The country is mostly mountainous in the interior, with narrow coastal plains. Agriculture is the most important sector of the economy, accounting for nearly 30 percent of the GNP, employing 62 percent of the labor force, and producing two-thirds of the exports. As with many developing nations, Honduras

faces the issues of a high population growth rate, estimated to be 3.1 percent, a high unemployment rate, a lack of basic services, a large public sector, and an over-dependence on exports such as coffee and bananas, which are subject to sharp price fluctuations.

During my official stay in Honduras, I visited 4 protected areas and added a fifth while on annual leave. What I saw was absolutely amazing. Our first stop was Copan, a World Heritage Site. Copan is nothing short of breath-taking. Nestled in a fertile valley, the site is testimony to the genius of the Mayans. Archeologists have studied the site in detail and much has been excavated and stabilized. These experts speculate that as many as 30,000 people may have lived there in 800 AD. If true, this would make Copan one of the largest urban centers in the world at that time, certainly larger than anything in Europe. Perhaps only urban centers in Asia would have been larger.

In a story that would not be unfamiliar to South-western archeologists, the collapse of Copan in 900 AD is thought to have been the result of an expansion by the urban community into the rich agricultural areas, moving the agricultural base of the city up into the marginal lands on the nearby hillsides. Since the community was no longer self sufficient, the rulers had to share power with others who could supply the population with the necessary food. This power sharing led to the diminishment of the rulers' authority and eventually to the abandonment of Copan. The site boasts a visitor center, an arts and crafts shop, a small restaurant, bilingual guides, and an entrance gate to control visitation. As the most famous tourist attraction in Honduras, it is well maintained, administered by the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History, a semi-autonomous government organization.

Our next stop was at Cuzucó NP. We left early one morning, climbing straight up 2,000 meters out of San Pedro Sula on a dirt road. Even with four wheel drive, we managed to get stuck in one place. The climb passes through several life zones and gives a fascinating look at the changes civilization is bringing, not only to the people, but also the environment. It is almost like the rite of passage ones goes through going from Key West to Fort Jefferson National Monument. The visitor begins in San Pedro Sula, the entrepreneurial capital of the country, an example of our 20th century civilization, climbs out of the city, leaving the 20th century behind, and passes through small villages and clusters of huts, most of which do not even have electricity.

At the village of Buenos Aires, I would recommend that all vehicles be required to stop and that the tourist make the rest of the trip, some 4-5 kilometers, by horse or mule. The villagers in Buenos Aires should be given the opportunity to offer modest services such as guiding, mule rental, food, etc. This would make them supporters of the park because they would have an economic interest in its preservation. The passage from the 20th century would end in Cuzucó NP, a slice of what Honduras looked like prior to arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century.

Cuzucó is a smallish rainforest park, some 10,000 ha. The park's only infrastructure currently is a small visitor contact station, without electricity. Plans for the park call for construction of small huts where visitors could stay overnight for a modest fee. What they would see while there is the astonishing biodiversity. During the time I wandered in the park, it occurred to me that I could not name one living thing.

The Honduran Forest Service administers the park and has in place one unique management strategy I believe could be profitably adopted by the NPS. In the middle of the park, they have established what they call a *zona intocable*, an untouchable zone. No one is allowed to go there, no visitors, no administrators, and no scientists. The concept is that it will serve as a control point to measure the pace of change in the rest of the park caused by visitation. Wouldn't it be great if we could establish such zones in some of our great wilderness parks in Alaska or in the West?

From Cuzucó, we went on to La Fortaleza de San Fernando de Omoa, an 18th century Spanish fort on the northern coast. The Spanish constructed the fort to protect a nearby harbor. The Hondurans were involved in an historic preservation project at the fort, and their efforts reminded me of many of the preservation problems at our coastal parks.

Our final stop was the Lancelilla Botanical Gardens. Although threatened by nearby development, the Gardens contain a representative sample of the native species of Honduras and a demonstration of the exotic species that have been brought to the country over the years by agricultural or business experts. There is the thought that the gardens represent a kind of genetic warehouse for the native species of the country. If any type of restoration ecology ever became feasible, the gardens would serve as seed sources.

The trip provided a fascinating look at the conservation issues facing a Central American country. All the official representatives with whom I met were appreciative of the interest Secretary Lujan is demonstrating in Honduras. They hope for close cooperation between the bureaus of the Department and the Honduran government. I see several areas in which I believe the NPS could assist. I propose that we consider establishing a system of "sister parks" for some of the protected areas within Honduras. The staff in the sister parks could provide technical advice, exchange information, and provide an avenue for our visitors to get to know the parks of another country. Any one of our coastal forts, for instance, faces many of the same issues that face the staff at Omoa. Our archeological parks share issues with Copan. Natural areas have much in common with Cuzucó. I remember that the Peace Corps used to administer a similar program with schools, called, as I recall, the School Partnership Program. Maybe we could get the Peace Corps to establish a similar program with parks.

Also, we could provide assistance in the country's environmental education program. It is absolutely certain that the success of any conservation efforts in Honduras will revolve around changing peoples' attitudes toward unchecked exploitation of natural resources.

There also are possibilities for technical advice and assistance in areas such as interpretation, protection, and resources management. I saw, as an example, several things during our visit to the restoration project at the fort that bothered me. I'm sure a good historic architect could make useful suggestions. Our archeologists could assist in establishing processes for field investigations and data collection and recording. Aside from the guides at Copan, I saw no attempt to interpret park resources to any visitors who might show up at a protected area. Finally, there is a critical need for coordinated planning for park areas. I reviewed, for example, the goals and objectives for Cuzucó. I did not feel there was enough emphasis on consulting with local people or the other agencies that will have to cooperate if the park is ever going to be open for visitation.